

Shirley Pierce: Screenwriter

Bringing Hollywood's lessons to Queensland: Create for family audiences



Shirley Pierce has developed storylines for some of Hollywood's major stars, including Cuba Gooding Jr, Judi Dench and Julie Andrews. Now she lives and produces movies on the Gold Coast.

There are many quiet exports that bring money into Queensland. As one of the busiest screenwriters in the Smart State, Shirley Pierce's work is one of those quiet exports.

She not only writes movies and television for Australian producers but has a range of international clients.

At the recent launch of the Asia

Pacific Screen Awards, the Minister for Tourism and Fair Trading, Peter Lawlor singled Shirley Pierce out as one of Queensland's success stories because of her current work on a script for a CGI (computer animated) feature film for prolific producer Andres Vicente Gomez of Lolafilms in Spain.

"In one week recently, I had the Spanish project, a Korean project and

a Hollywood project all in discussion along with a television series in Melbourne," Ms Pierce said. "I love living and working in Queensland, but I create content for a global marketplace."

Shirley Pierce cut her creative teeth in the offices and on the sound stages of one of the toughest film markets in the world – Hollywood. There she created and developed films for MGM, Sony Pictures and the Walt Disney Studios where she worked on over two dozen projects with responsibilities ranging from story development to marketing and merchandising. She has written for stars such as Cuba Gooding Jr, Judi Dench, Julie Andrews, Janet Jackson and Roseanne Barr.

Her Disney credits include *Dinosaur* (the ambitious and successful US\$200million CGI film), *Home On The Range* and *Meet The Robinsons*. Locally, her credits include WWE's *Marline* and the TV series *Saddle Club* and *Mortifie*, to name a few.

"I've worked in both live action and animation for producers in the US, Australia and Japan. On any given project, I may write the whole screenplay or just the dialogue. I also doctor scripts for producers who have purchased scripts that need reworking before they go into production."

KNOWS AUDIENCES

Ms Pierce attributes her success to her awareness of the most important element in filmmaking – the audience.

"I learned early that filmmaking is a business. Instead of selling 'widgets', we sell entertainment. There is always a constant struggle between commerce and art. If a film is all art – even award winning – audiences won't pay to see it and investors lose money – or tax payers if it's government funded. Most successful independent films have artistic elements that appeal strongly to very specific target markets.

"Art doesn't have to be isolated. It's possible to build those elements into a film with commercial appeal. The bottom line is that if a film doesn't return its investment, it's bad business," she said.

"Awards are wonderful – reception areas all over Los Angeles are decorated with them. But you have to pull in the numbers at the box office and get good ratings if you want to stay in business and have investors come back for more.

"The consistent winning business model in the box office sweepstakes is the family film market. The demographic for family films is massive and the market is global and lucrative. As a case in point, it's the model followed by Walt Disney Studios, the most powerful content provider of family entertainment in the world. It's particularly relevant now because it's been historically proven that in tight economic times, movies always remain the go to entertainment of choice."

Shirley Pierce's goal is to write and produce films that follow in the footsteps of Australian mega-successful family films like *Crocodile Dundee*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Happy Feet* and *The Castle*.

"Not only did Australian audiences flock to those films but they were loved by audiences around the world because of their simple stories, likable characters and empowering endings," she said. "They were rated PG or PG 13 and had universal themes that everyone could relate to.

"Family films don't have to be just cuddly animals or kids saving the world ... there's a huge range of subject matter which appeals to an older audience."

INVESTOR RETURNS

Knowing that films can be produced in Australia for a fraction of their Hollywood cost, Ms Pierce feels she's in the right place at the right time.

The first two films on her production slate are already in development. One is an irreverent, CGI animated comedy about a hip urban feline named *Muggs* and the other is a live-action romantic comedy *The Mating Game*.

"Research commissioned by Australia's peak film funding body, Screen Australia, places family films and comedies in the highest scoring categories of films preferred by Australian audiences. So that tells you something. More importantly, for longevity of the industry, the returns are there," Ms Pierce said.

"I'm currently raising money for the CGI animated feature which we can

produce at a fraction of the cost that Hollywood studios pay," Ms Pierce said. "The potential returns are enormous. As an example, *Hoodwinked*, a relatively inexpensive, small independent film made over US\$110million (not including ancillaries such as DVDs, TV and toys). Audiences are ready to spend their hard earned cash when a film grabs them.

"At the studio end of the market, the CGI film *Shrek* took in US\$798,957,081 just at the box office (not including the ancillary market). This is a lucrative business."

Ms Pierce is quick to point out that in the family film market, especially animation, the ancillary market can produce the best returns.

"The flow on of a feature film – i.e. DVDs, Pay TV, Broadcast TV, soundtracks, merchandising and most importantly, video games – can produce more income than the box office," she said. "And there are no geographic limitations with animation.

"Families and children all over the world can relate and fall in love with well drawn characters – all recorded in the local language without subtitles. That makes the ancillary market global.

"My daughter's room is a testament to the power of the ancillary market for children. It's crammed with movie themed books, action figures and toys.

"My job as a producer is to capitalise on that. It's the same basic philosophy which any manufacturer uses – to create a business that's cost-effective and with a range of products that appeals to the broadest market. Our product happens to have storytelling, art and entertainment as its selling points. How many other products have such built in advertising for their ancillary markets as films do?"

Her current CGI animated feature, *Muggs* already has an award winning director, a Grammy winning composer and a major US music star attached.

"We have two offers on the table to take the production to China and produce it there. However, my goal is to do it here in Queensland, so we are currently meeting investors with that in mind. The state is a global leader in the computer games market, why not build on that talent base to make CGI feature films?"



Shirley Pierce has lately also enjoyed local successes – while still writing family scripts for Hollywood – including *Muggs* and *The Saddle Club* series.

GIVING BACK

With extensive Hollywood experience in her pocket, Shirley Pierce has now become part of the Queensland film community and believes in giving back.

She shares her expertise with emerging Queensland screenwriters at both Bond and Griffith universities. She also assesses screenplays and works with Queensland writers for the Queensland film funding body, the Pacific Film and Television Corporation.

"There is so much creative talent here flush with original ideas," Ms Pierce said.

She has also been appointed to the Queensland College of Art Industry Advisory Board, the Queensland Screen Industry Council, and lectures at the Bond University Centre for Film and Television.

"Queensland is an awesome place to live," Ms Pierce said. "Its wealth of creative people and film crews plus the variety of locations and weather, makes this the pre-eminent place to support and make profitable films."

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